

Who, 'we'?

The Constitution and the Singular Identity of the Collective

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Abstract

The article claims that it is necessary and relevant to approach singular identity: The ‘who, we?’ question as indexical. For this, it suggests concepts and approaches from social theory outside of the ‘organization’ field. It also presents the kind of analysis this could facilitate through three cases suggested as prototypical of an expanded concept of organization. First, the Narcotics Anonymous is seen to mystify its essential workings with a religious metaphor added to its appearance as a standardized civil society association. Second, a grass-roots-based collective of social youth work is viewed as struggling for recognition through a performative branding hidden behind a radically situated self-conception. Finally, an emerging web-portal collective is modeled as a co-authoring of counselling with art and research that seeks to reflect itself as at once concrete and universal. Through these analyses, it is attempted to cast a new light on the issue of organizational identity, which could not be sufficiently grasped in the dominant functionalist approaches, nor in the systemic, institutionalist, or post-structuralist theories that oppose them.

Keywords

Identity, singularity, recognition, collective, subjectivity

The Problem of Singular Collective Identity

The time of the organization is out of joint. This diagnosis – the wording borrowed through Derrida (1994) from Shakespeare’s Hamlet – suggests itself when the truth about the depth of our collective identities dawns on us right at the moment when those collectives appear to us as arbitrary, and we begin to reshuffle them at will – or by accident. We now know that our achievements and thoughts, our affects and hopes, are largely collective; even research is no longer attributable to the outstanding genius. Yet, nation states crumble traumatically or are ‘made great again’ in postmodern irony; universities (like other public institutions) are reorganized faster than logos can be designed; firms matter still less to the financial flows that were supposed to circumscribe them as property; and families become artifacts of biological and social network technologies.

In almost any work organization, the question keeps coming up: Who are we? And not only as the attempt to describe or understand various features or ‘values’ of an organization taken as given, but more simply and basically: who, “we”? *What is the relevant unit we index when we say “we”?* And in practical terms, who exactly *should* “we” constitute as “us”, and why and how?

Organizational identity has become a crucial problematic, but most theories of organizational identity remain unable to address it at this basic level – first of all, because this calls for a reflection upon self as *singular*. For this, the functionalist impulse to theorize identity only as an aggregate of abstract qualities that can be said to characterize a given organization (over time, in comparison, etc.), and the procedures and possible outcomes of that characterization (as do e.g. Albert and Whetten [1985]; Whetten [2006]), falls obviously short. Singular self-identity is not reducible to a more or less operational definition. Of course, organization theory has long struggled with the functionalism that caters to its immediate relevance; and much current writing seems devoted to this struggle. But perhaps the point has to be made repeatedly because the argument is not taken to its full implications. It is not sufficient to supplant or replace tasks and coordination with institutional reproduction or the autopoiesis of communication systems; the systemic and (new-) institutionalist reactions to the limitations of functionalist organization theory still curiously take “the organization” for granted as always-already constituted and always striving to survive. More generally, focusing on persistence is sociology’s key tool for overcoming functionalism; but persistence somehow no longer persists. Foucauldian governmentality highlights just such historical change, but it helps us reflect concepts rather than units. And those who emphasize the *incessant becoming* of organization, whether with social practice theory, complexity theory or Deleuzian poststructuralism, are equally uninterested in what constitutes its singularity. Yet, eschewing or denying the organization as “actually existing entity” (Stacey 2011, 41) does not do away with it; it pops up like a ghost, once implications for practice are considered. The approach that comes closest to addressing singular identity is probably the narrative, which, however, tends to reduce constitution to myths (of origin and purpose) and leave open the whole ‘mimetic’ question at this crucial point, even when it admits to ‘tacit’ (Carlsen, 2014) or ‘emergent’ narratives (Mattingly, 2010).

‘Organization’ seems to designate a mid-level kind of social unit of its own, and one that should be a rationally designed association or community of choice. Although work stress today may come from the hassle of keeping pace with ever more frequent and ever less rational restructurings (Wainwright and Calnan, 2002), ‘organizations’ ought to be the most malleable kind of social units. But many of the ways that these questions appear seem similar to current problems of state and family identity. And part of why the problem of organizational identity appears is that these other collectives no longer provide the solid identity basis, nor the necessary infrastructural resources, with which to engage in the turmoil of endless regroupings at work.

It is for this reason that I can hope to contribute to the field of organization studies. I am not a native organization theorist. But I have worked on the general problem of the constitution of singular collectives, focusing empirically at the overlap of pedagogy with leadership in self-established project groups and collectives (Nissen 2012). To this, I have taken up some of the many contemporary philosophical discussions and theories of community that have arisen after the collapse of communism and the cold war state system (e.g. Balibar [2009]; Esposito [2010]; Nancy [1991]), juxtaposed to contemporary theories of subjectivity (e.g. Brown and Stenner [2009]; Stengers [2008]; Žižek [1999]). The hypothesis I have pursued is that the formation of subjectivity occurs in participation and power, in relations of recognition and mutual constitution

between singular subjects; and that collectives are themselves among these singular subjects. We and I, us and me - and our relations to you, them, etc. - define and co-construct each other, in collaboration and in struggle. Given the trans-disciplinary nature of this approach, it may appear abstract and sketchy; but I will attempt to unfold it here, and demonstrate some potentials of precisely moving between the disciplines that have taken up identity. The problem of identity anyway tends to shift the focus around between individual, collective and community (Mallett and Wapshott, 2011), and is often (as in Hatch and Schultz [2002]) tackled by taking personal as a model for organizational identity with implications that are not fully explored.

This providing my vantage point, I do not offer here a review of the literature on organizational identity, nor base my argument on the state of this art. Rather, I offer an outsider's view that mostly takes "organization" to be one out of several cases of a more wide-reaching problem that is central also to contemporary politics, ethics, education, therapy, and love. From this wider perspective, 'organization' seems a useful case to consider, precisely because of its unabashedly artificial nature. It is readily taken as starting point that 'organization' is an intentional human design. When, on the other hand, we discuss collectives such as states or families, let alone if we take up the question of how individual humans are constituted as singular subjects, we face myriads of preconceptions to the effect that its constitution is taken as a given, following with necessity from its substantial nature (e.g. that geographical territory must index the state, that sexual reproduction in and of itself establishes family, or that singular subjecthood is given with the body of the human individual). And that, since this constitution lies outside of the lawful social processes we study, it may be vital, but it does not deserve any further analysis.

So, the plan for this text is to render organizational identity as a case of the more general problem of collective subjectivity – of how to theorize ourselves as collectives that cannot be taken as ultimate or as premise; thus, in practical terms, yet terms that must pull the rug out from under us by asking, even of this text itself: "who, 'we'?"

Method

I have introduced the problematic of this article by referring to a simple set of collectives that I hope will be familiar to most or even all academics: nation state, university, firm, and nuclear family. Yet, even as they are that, three of them are also different from the organizations that are prototypical of organization theory – the exemplars that we tend to have in mind when we think of the abstract concept (like "bird" makes us think of a sparrow rather than an ostrich, cf. Hacking [1995]). These are generally represented as firms (before the dominance of finance): Rational hierarchies of coordinated tasks, or systems that reproduce by representing themselves as such; and mostly, private companies – or, perhaps state agencies, but then viewed as equivalent to private companies (such as armies viewed in abstraction from valor, cruelty and violent death). That prototype is not really problematized by bracketing it and focusing instead on discourse, practice, or event. So here, instead, we shall encounter collectives that are given proper names, are recognized, self-reflect and act as singular entities, even as they are radically different from the prototypical "organization". The method in that is to work on the alternative prototypes in order to question and expand the concept. Consequently, in the following, we shall encounter some other 'unusual' organizations: 12 step fellowships, emergent grassroots youth work activities, and a collaborative project organized around an evolving website.

It is quite possible that some readers will prefer to still have the old prototype in mind. Fair enough. After all, it not only promises relevance, and the consultancy fees that come with it, but

also professional identity; with it, organizationalists meet up and confirm each other in what and who they are. Or, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, relevance and identity are boosted through the brief encounter with its Other: The complexities and existential uncertainties of constitution are directly reduced by engaging in a consultation that uses the interpellating language of ‘organization’ as if that were, indeed, always-already what and who ‘we’ are. And the consultants are confirmed even more in their community by engaging with limit or over-limit cases, at once positioning ‘us’ as engineers with a profane box of tools and adorning ‘us’ with the silver lining of utopian potentials. But it is my hope that divergent narratives may become prototypical of expanded ways of designing, reflecting, and theorizing organization as collective.

More specifically: The examples we began with will remain in sight. The state and the family are classic examples of collectives, because they are, or have been taken to be, “ultimate” each in their way: The territorial circumscription of a communal “everything” by a sovereign power, versus the inter-subjectivity that emerges from below, caring for the “everything” of individual life¹. The university is close to us, and even *is* us; and the ways it resists being reduced to “organization”, before our very eyes, are striking and instructive.

When we take up 12 step fellowships, we engage in a number of paradoxically coexisting opposite absolutes, beginning with the participant’s free choice of surrender – to a collective that denies itself. Enacting these paradoxes is how the collective does its job, and how it perpetually defines itself and its participants - both as existentially precarious. The standard view of it as a civil society association (in the classic meaning derived from Tönnies [2001]) regulated with inflexible and unchanging rules, is how it prefers to talk of itself, much as a pious person, in all honesty, will call himself a sinner. But I will try to demonstrate some gains in rearticulating the subject-formation and the cultural change that this performs.

The grass-roots based communities of youth social workers that I and my colleagues studied from 1993 and on were becoming-state, in political processes of recognition. These were opposite to 12 step fellowships, not only with respect to how their explicitly political project identity coincided with their formation of participants, but also in that they claimed to reject any and all rules. Further, the historical singularity that this brings to the surface highlights an opposite way in which my own position in relation to the collective appears inconsequential: Whereas it bounces off a successfully enduring recipe, it seems irrelevant from the first instance in relation to a one-off historical event.

Yet, I will attempt to show how, in both cases, I will be engaging you, dear reader, in an inescapably inter-subjective relation of critique and recognition. Critique, here, then, does not mean measuring those collectives, or some features attributed to them, against a standard that I claim as universal. Rather, it is the objectification implied whenever a subject deals with another subject, mediated by certain theoretical or otherwise culturally evolved concepts; and it is the subject-formation (education in the deep sense, or *Bildung*) achieved thereby. Although this implies a moment of freezing living practice into artifacts – such as this text – this process is inherently creative. It expresses a hope for relevances that are at least partly not-yet-known in Ernst Bloch’s sense (1995). As such, it recognizes collectives by co-creating prototypes that articulate their potentials for taking us beyond what we thought we knew about organizations.

¹ The inescapable backdrop here is Hegel’s triangular social model: State, civil society, and family (Hegel, 1968). The modern problematization of it, which began already with Marx’ exposure of the state as instrument of the ruling class and the bourgeois family as the seat of the ideological illusion of privacy, has not as yet come up with convincing structural alternatives; and so, this text is one out of many contemporary attempts to reconfigure it. Cf. Honneth (1995), Højrup (2003), Williams (1997).

Incidentally – but deliberately – this implies an expanded version of the concept of prototype itself, more akin to the industrial connotations of the term (Jensen 1987).

My third and last case will serve as a direct illustration of this. This is a project in which I am currently involved. The project is an emerging infrastructure of art, therapy and research enmeshed with young drug users' public self-presentations at a website. We have ideas that make us keen to develop it, but we don't know exactly where it will lead, and so we don't quite know who we are. I invite you to help us explore: Jump in!

Let me recapitulate the thrust of this argument in simpler terms. We shall discuss collectives that do not easily appear as 'organizations'. The point of this is to suggest concepts with which to reflect what it is we do when we constitute or dissolve singular collectives, some of which may be called organizations; when "who, we?" is meant to be taken literally and practically. We cannot take the collective for granted; yet we are not out to explain how the collective persists. Not because we are indifferent to the existential question; quite the opposite: Rather than persistence, it is mortality we are trying to understand. This is useful at a time when we design, redesign, and unravel ourselves as collectives faster than ever, without paying too much attention, and often suffer from it.

The NA

We shall first lay the groundwork by considering organizational identity *ex negativo*: The 12 step fellowship. For the sake of simplicity, the Narcotics Anonymous (NA) will serve as our prototypical 12 step fellowship since that is the branch that best distills a heterotopia, a time-space slot that reverts and amplifies current cultural forms (Foucault 1986). *Ex negativo*, because the first striking thing about NA is that it *renounces* collective identity; it is really the organization which is anonymous, not its participants. This is written in the '12 traditions':

9. NA, as such, ought never be organized, but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
10. Narcotics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the NA name ought never be drawn into public controversy.
11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films. (NA 2008, 61).

Personal anonymity means that 'doing service' for the fellowship is not publicly announced or recognized; it certainly does not include concealing, let alone denying, addict identity. Far from it: For NA members, the 'coming-out' as 'addict' is an important part of what they gain from membership. The identity of a 'recovering addict' provides a public framework of meaning with which to handle addiction, precisely as an ongoing crisis of selfhood that otherwise ends inexorably in "jails, institutions, dereliction and death" (NA 2008, 7). The self of an NA addict is first of all relationally defined and performed, continuously reconstituted and maintained in acts of surrender to communal monitoring and communal ethics. Numerous NA procedures and mottos assert this humility. "An addict alone is in bad company", as the saying goes; and providing the better company, within which the self is reborn as recovering, is NA's key to recovery – this is what "works" for those who "keep coming back" to "work it" (Keis, Nymann and Nissen 2016).

But the NA itself seems to exist only as a standard that is taken on by participants, the artifacts that carry it (books, websites, etc.), and the sponsorships (mentor/mentee-relations) and

group meetings that execute it. This is also why it is easy for me to refer to the NA as a case: Anyone can visit their website, in any language, read their books, listen to their ‘speaks’, or attend their meetings – anyone who does not think she knows all about it already from Hollywood movies and TV shows. The fellowship seems to be nothing but a brand, a franchise with very limited liability – and one that is simple, extremely standardized and stable, and, as such, breeds and spreads like a successful genome.

There is one thing about it, however, that strikes the modern, secular eye as peculiar: The ubiquitous religious references. This includes members performing the paradox of an absolute surrender to a “Higher Power” whom they claim to only believe in quite profanely (Valverde 2002). This can be explained historically, with reference to the Lutheran origins of the AA, and then to the reluctance of members to revise the given standard. But it is not simply comparable, again, to obsolete but enduring parts of a genome that prevails for other reasons. Rather, as always, the key to religion is existential. As already Bateson (1972) hypothesized, the ‘Higher Power’ is a name for the ‘community’ – and my additional claim is that it refers to the collective as *singular* – to whom the participant submits her existence. Or, to be precise, it is its *mask* – a placeholder for a repressed indexical reference. The professed profanity of the sinner’s approach to the deity does nothing to reduce the depths of her faith: One does not believe in a mask. Faith, however, is not a chosen or socialized agreement with certain propositions or procedures. The idealization of standards as unquestionable prescriptions – as eternal ideals – performs an act of *submission*. What truly matters about them is beside them – their particular contents are always only humble ‘human’ attempts to capture the essence, which is always ‘something else’. This ‘something else’ could be the communal care and recognition that is given to the ‘recovering addict’.

But let us slow down at this point and look closer. The ‘recovering addict’ is a subject who is *perpetually becoming*; the continuity with the previous ‘using’ addict is one of sacrifice: the ‘user’ gives herself over to the annihilating self-critique that allows the ‘recovering addict’ to emerge. Crucially, *in the same process, the collective emerges*, in the shapes of the group and the sponsor who accept the sacrifice and return the grace of recognition, based on an unquestioned premise of equal identity that implies and necessitates care: “We can only keep what we have by giving it away”. The ‘we’ here, as in all NA texts, is plural; it refers to each and every NA addict, in this case each member of the group, who can only perform recovery as caring sponsor and audience, and by providing a role model through ‘coming out’. But the symmetrical becoming is not reducible to individuals; it is always you, me, *and us*. The individual sponsor or audience member will always stress personal anonymity in the sense that her NA credentials derive exclusively from the collective (Keis, Nymann and Nissen 2016).

The question is, of course, why the NA ideology must describe ‘us’ as an aggregate of individuals, and alienate the collective itself – the ‘we’ as singular – in the image of a mythical ‘Higher Power’. Explanations by reference to pervasive cultural individualism would be insufficient for an ideology that otherwise emphasizes submission as against individual autonomy. Rather, I suggest the taboo works in three ways. First, identifying the singular ‘we’ could be a hubris if this were to expand the agency of the collective beyond the premises on which it was constituted; if it began to care for concerns beyond the recovery of its members, the process of symmetrical becoming could be broken. This articulation is close to the NA ideology of anonymity – and incidentally, it is often referred to as one main reason why taking up 12 step standards in professional or state services is very different and allegedly much less beneficial (Mäkela et al. 1996). Second, the mask of the ‘Higher Power’ makes for a very flexible, ‘post-

modern' approach to constituencies. It is a paradoxical but essential fact that the embodiment of the collective – the individuals who constitute it – can be relatively interchangeable, even as the collective itself is existentially vital. Third, and crucially, the collective is 'transcendent' in the sense of its continuous becoming, re-constituted in recurrent moments as singular on a utopian horizon as a collectivity of hope (Mattingly 2010).

If this is so, what is the relevance of my analytic suggestions? If it works, why fix it? Because it doesn't, quite; it only works for those who work it, as the NA tautology goes. The standard form of a civil society association freezes the pair of opposing absolutes: The life-saving submission to the 'Higher Power' is supposed to be chosen as freely as any commodity on the market – but, when it is *not* chosen, this is left unexplained as 'disease'. The 'disease' is the husk continuously left behind by the recovering addict, but it is also how the NA blames the victims of its limitations.

The mystification of the other side of the equation: the becoming of the collective as singular – also obscures the resources this activates and the care it may provide. The absence of an indexical reference to 'us', to the collective as something more than a recipe and relations of exchange between individuals, makes it harder to face and acknowledge social facts – such as the very weighty presence of state power and state resources, as well as of friendships and couples; these are generally considered 'dirty' influences, profane, inauthentic and possibly disturbing, if not antithetical to 12 step recovery (Keis, Nymann and Nissen 2016). It works to blind the fellowships to the cultural changes they address and those they express – such as therapeutic individualism, blurred boundaries between state and civil society, not to mention general medicalization and rapid pharmacological developments. And of course, it narrows any organizational change to the remedy of traumatic reconstitutions, locally as well as globally – to the forming of new local groups, or even new 12 step fellowships. These weaknesses are likely to grow in significance, even as they are covered by the blind mechanism of blaming their individual victims and compensated by the ongoing dependence epidemic.

The mask of the Higher Power, then, works smoothly to continuously regenerate hope and facilitate becoming subjectivity within the parameters of the given state of affairs; but it only achieves the strict standardization of its successful brand by separating the universal ideal from its situated conditions. In that sense, it works as an 'abstract utopia' (Bloch 1995) that mirrors and reverts the earthly present in the imagination and then returns to constitute the real sites as volatile 'heterotopia' (Foucault 1986). The contradictory absolutes that keep resurfacing cancel out any problematic situations and conditions; they make for a way of tolerating these, that is, surviving them while relinquishing any hope of addressing them productively.

The question is, of course, whether a kind of 12 step fellowships could arise that could reconnect its hopes to its situated conditions; for whom the process of constitution would not need to be mystified as a Higher Power; where the flexibility of emergent collectives could do without their mask; where the process of symmetrical becoming could itself take account of the resources, the powers, and the cultural and technological formations that anyway circumscribe its impact.

In any case, the example – which, to be sure, I could only sketch in the space of this argument – may help us distinguish between the organization's brand as standard or as indexical reference to a singular collective. This distinction is presented by the NA's concept of a 'Higher Power', as distinct from (and in its relation to) the generalized individual identities characterized as 'we' and 'us' in the NA standard texts, and as distinct from (and related to) the specific experiences, shortcomings, and remedies that are attributed to and prescribed for those agents. The persistence

of this religious form well into a highly secularized and medicalized culture reveals how singular collective identity is at once vital and taboo.

This analysis resonates in many ways with ‘classic’ analyses of ideology as alienated expressions of state power – in so far as these move beyond Marxist sociology’s self-limitation to a critique of civil society that remains within the taboo against the issue of sovereignty imposed by that same civil society (cf. e.g. Althusser [1994]; Højrup [2003]; Žizek [2004]); and, for breaking that taboo, it shares with these theories the fate of appearing as far-fetched as, I hope, somehow alluring.

The Crew

My second case, as mentioned, is opposite in many ways. First of all, since it was non-standard, I must rely on my readers to accept my brief but condensed descriptions, if you do not wish to consult more comprehensive renderings (Mørck 2010; Nissen 2004, 2012, 2015). The Crew was what first sent me puzzling beyond the confines of ‘organization’, when, in 1993, I was hired to understand and describe it, not only as a social youth work agency, but also as a new kind of fusion of Copenhagen City’s welfare services with a civil society ‘grassroots’ community, carried by a state development grant as an outreach project for ‘street kids’. Since it worked by recruiting “socially excluded youth” as participants in an “organization to help” just those – as it described itself – it was generally considered part of the state’s enlisting of voluntary associations and self-help. But it was very different from the 12 step standard. It was defined with an explicitly political agenda. Most of its founders were (informally) trained in activism rather than youth work or counselling, and many of its activities took this shape – e.g. street happenings, public hearings, or giving interviews or lectures to students about the plight of a ‘street kid’, representing The Crew and criticizing City services and policies. Branching off a ‘total theater’ youth project, The Crew used the mobilizing potentials in (sub-) cultural events, in direct continuity with what many activists had done as organizers in youth politics. Thus, my first fieldwork was watching a theater show that presented the story of a street kid through gang violence, drugs, and then the oppressions of bureaucracy and psychiatry, before finding his home at The Crew – to a mixed audience of the young participants’ friends and family, and various news media, social work officials, and decision makers.

The Crew’s brand was non-existent as standard but ubiquitous as indexical reference to the singular collective; for instance, participants would don ‘The Crew’ t-shirts that signified their belonging with a logo, but no set of rules or statements of purpose or principle were ever written. In fact, the *absence* of rules was a defining and proudly declared pedagogical principle. In other words (since here, pedagogics and leadership coincided), the organization was as ‘loosely coupled’ as one could imagine: The weekly common meeting was all about collective activities; the ‘we’ they spoke was always in the singular (as in “we have a problem”). But decisions were reached in consensus, and participants were only obliged by them to the extent they *wanted*. This form of obligation – called the ‘*principle of fancy*’ – was a radical expression of the grassroots background, premised, for many activists, on a post-communist legacy: The social sustainability that allowed them to recruit ‘street kids’ was only feasible through a complete rejection of the rational organization of the tradition of militant socialism.

One might think this ‘voluntary’ structure, after all, would bring The Crew on a par with NA as a civil society association continuously chosen by participants. But two important facts made a world of difference. First, for many participants, The Crew served to a large extent as a substitute family with an all-encompassing and lasting, but personal and mutual intimacy.

Second, the political agenda engaged The Crew in a quest for recognition that formed part of the struggles over Copenhagen and Danish social policies. Both qualities - the *becoming-family* and the *becoming-state* - were vital to The Crew's identity as well as its ability to mobilize socially excluded young people. They might seem to push in opposite directions, and certainly they were often performed in separate contexts and activities; but in fact they presupposed each other. This point necessitates a little detour into the general sociology of family, friendship, and state.

Pushing friendship beyond its usual premise – that each person sustains her own everyday life autonomously, and on that basis regularly confirms the relationship – toward expanded care, intimacy, and forgiveness, and, not least, the *interference* that this implies – requires mandate, resources and will. In the traditional nuclear family, these are provided through the fact that members directly trace their origins as subjects within the family. Thus, the family is the belonging that represents who we always-already are as singular persons; through this, we identify strongly with each other, and we are among each other's core concerns as singular persons². Outside of the self-grown nuclear family, the mandate, resources and will required for an expanded care and interference are provided only through the state. Civil society collectives are limited to exclusion or exit as their ultimate power; they are 'communities of choice'. Each state institution may operate through the power of exclusion, too, but state sovereignty is expressed in the power and the requirement to care and interfere beyond each exclusion – on the whole range to the point of 'bare life', or death (Agamben 1998). However, even as democratic states can be said to be constituted in a mutual recognition between state and citizens, and even as the category of 'citizen' most recently has come (in some places) to include inmates of prisons and mental hospitals – this 'community of fate' relationship is still very far from the mutuality that characterizes friendships or families. Friendships are based on the mutual recognition of privacy; and family relationships are mutual as vital carriers of identity. Both these relationships are personal, that is, oriented toward the other as singular person; friends and family members are irreplaceable. But the relations of state agencies and professionals to their inmates / clients / patients / users – beyond the civil society association format often implied in the concept of the 'user' (Hunniche et. al., forthcoming) – are generally asymmetrical and impersonal. They even tend to be more so, the more resources and will to care and interfere are invested. The mandate derives from the state's coercive powers, which are regulated by general (standardized) law.

On this background, the question of how The Crew could form family-like relations that went far beyond the commitments of friendships or even many families, in an organization governed by the principle of fancy and with no rules, is of some principle interest. The answer suggested here will take its departure from The Crew's struggle for recognition.

Characteristically, The Crew began (in 1991) with a public hearing where renowned experts, sympathetic politicians, and young people self-defined as 'street kids' declared the desperate need for a new approach to socially excluded young people in Copenhagen. The hearing, along with the many activist manifestations that followed, would powerfully impact the news media – as always, keen to ignite moral panics and blame government neglect – and place The Crew with a fashionable image, paradoxically at once in a 'neo-philanthropic' social policy trend (Villadsen 2011) and as a post-communist avant-garde. This political leverage fueled its organizational image and vice versa, and resources of many kinds began to flow into The Crew, culminating in the state grant that would pay for a handful of jobs (including half my salary) for a few years.

² The weak link, it follows, is the couple – and in these times, we do witness a crisis of the nuclear family due to the decline of the cultural and institutional forces and resources that held together marriage (Giddens 2013).

This story resembles that of many other of social problems identified, struggled over, and institutionalized as part of the growing welfare states of the 20th century, except for two aspects of the situation and one characteristic of The Crew's way to handle it. *First*, the issue of 'street kids' matched a general trend toward identifying the 'socially excluded' in the broad terms of their exclusion itself (as 'street kids', 'homeless', or 'socially excluded' etc. rather than, say, as drug users, psychiatric patients, delinquents etc.); the focus was on outreach and recruitment, and it included a reflexive questioning of the established services and their standard procedures. The result was a broad, holistic and subject-oriented work object that *resisted standardization*, not unlike what Mark Philp (1979) described as the core of social work; this was additionally amplified by the theme of 'youth' which was recognized as implying mobility and unfinished identities³. *Second*, the forces behind The Crew included a strong megatrend toward recognizing clients of public services as autonomous users – a trend we typically now recognize as 'New Public Management'⁴. The Crew accommodated and utilized those tendencies in a *performative* kind of social work and politics. The 'street kids' 'came out' and displayed their social problem as part of their quasi-therapeutic identity work *and* as part of The Crew's political activism: The ability to – not represent, but – *directly orchestrate* the voice of the socially excluded was The Crew's principal power asset.

This all meant that the struggle for recognition would not take the form of demands for – and result in a fixation as – provisions standardized in the name of equality, delivered by professionals in predefined institutions, as had been typical of the institutionalized social problems of the welfare state. Instead, the 'revolutionary', precarious *moment of becoming*, was prolonged – which was always the moment of universalism, the 'worksites of citizenship' that at once shape politics and persons (Balibar 2009). The Crew's way of phrasing this was "meeting youth in movement and on neutral ground" (Nissen 2015). Organizationally, this was identifiable as a continuous process of establishing new 'projects' in a tinkering that crucially included both 'outreach' to new groups of young people and negotiations with authorities who provided funding and legitimacy ad hoc. In terms of power balances, this meant that the organization, its key participants, and its identified 'users' were all precarious, at stake as singular subjects. Structurally, this implied to some extent the mutuality and person-orientation that we asked for above, and which could be articulated as an absence of rules and a principle of fancy. And, given the relative success of the struggle for recognition (in the 1990s), we can see how this could coincide with commanding substantial resources with which to engage in difficult personal issues.

But the struggle for recognition includes also a visibly utopian, transcendent aspect which I would claim was just as important as in the NA. This is why I and my colleagues have analyzed The Crew and its later offshoots and heirs with concepts derived from Hegel's dialectics of recognition (cf. Hegel [1977], see Nissen, 2012, ch. 7). The Crew would *interpellate* (Althusser 1994) its participants: Subjectify them by hailing and recruiting them as always-already given the human potentials defined by its struggle; a complex process that would imply a co-existence and alternation of mutuality and submission between collective and participants, and, vitally, a

³ Note how the concept of 'object' here comes close to the 'epistemic object' that Miettinen and Virkkunen (2005) discuss as vehicles for organizational change.

⁴ Of course, most readers in the West would now expect the autonomy of the user combined, rather, with a strict standardization of her 'problems' or 'diagnoses' and the 'evidence-based' procedures of their treatment; but the balance of forces was different in Copenhagen of the 1990s – and even now, the real picture is, fortunately, more complex.

horizon of hope. These ‘worksites of citizenship’ were not only sites of structural fluidity or hybridity, but also constituted as incomplete realizations of the dream of a democratized and expanded welfare state. As with the NA, a utopian horizon fueled the identity of participant with collective.

Granted, such hopes could resemble what is known from organization theory as ‘visions’ etc., and come with a skepticism as to their real impact, as the organization’s ‘culture’ is only superficially scratched by ‘espoused values’ etc. (Schein 2010). Now, my claim is not that program or vision statements simply shape subjectivities. But when they come to signify interpellation and open to a transcendent hope, they can be powerful symbols. Skepticism is often sound, but there is reason to suspect that ideological interpellation and transcendence are seriously underestimated when they are seen from a civil society perspective, for which subjectivity is always premised as given. The prototypical commercial organization of most organizationalists is founded in an almost absolute separation between profane interest and lofty ethics, neither of which is really capable of representing its practices as meaningful; meaning is then mystified as the substance of ‘organizational culture’. The NA was a limit case in that it defined itself through the workings of transcendence, but as a civil society association, which led to the alienated form of a ‘Higher Power’. But we know from the NA, and from the even more radical examples of certain religious sects and terror groups, that transcendent hope can trump individual self-interest, even the interest in survival. And as we know from history, this is no less the case if we refer to more ‘realistic’ hopes, as expressed in patriotism or revolutionary aspirations. Defining myself in the struggle for recognition of a singular collective is literally *beyond me*, even as it reciprocates to interpellate me as subject, to transform me deeply and reshape my sense of myself⁵. It was through such interpellation that The Crew could add a strong mutual identification to the structural flexibility, the loose coupling, and the empowerment that their political success provided; and this, in turn, made it possible to develop a pedagogical-organizational know-how concerning the tinkering of singular projects and groups within the broader collectivity of The Crew.

Even though I have tried here – as in previous writings – to objectify and generalize The Crew’s ideological form of collectivity, its coincidence of pedagogics with organization and politics, the story is first of all about *singular events*. It was historical circumstance that allowed The Crew’s utopia to be ‘concrete’ (Bloch 1995), that is, latent as a continuation of sufficiently strong tendencies, rather than to be alienated as ‘abstract utopia’ like the NA’s ‘Higher Power’. And the form of The Crew’s approach and organization was radically opposed to the standardized format and self-image of both state agencies and 12 step fellowships. So it appears straightforward to assert this historical singularity as the key finding and lesson that the reader should take home to her organization or her business school. Indeed, historicity *is* worth keeping in mind and often enough ignored. It is here that we should note the difference between the *standardization* that I criticized in the NA, and the way I describe The Crew as a *prototype* (Nissen 2009). Prototypes are, and in a certain sense remain, not-yet-types; their historical singularity, and the hopes of relevance without which they could not make coherent sense, are visible. With Latour (1987), we could say that they have not been ‘black-boxed’, or are not treated as such. And perhaps they never will be: If we consider certain famous pedagogical prototypes such A.S. Neill’s ‘Summerhill School’ or Makarenko’s ‘Gorkij Colony’, we might realize that even in hindsight, they never quite stabilize as standardized methods.

⁵ This is one way to rearticulate Kierkegaard’s concept of selfhood; cf. to this Kierkegaard (1980), and Scarry (1985).

The epistemology implied could be articulated with social practice theory (as in Nicolini, [2012]; see Mørck [2010]). Rather than certain formal procedures and structures we have a community of practice; pitting ‘practice’ against ‘organization’, one might hold up the ‘anti-method’ (Nissen 2003) of historical and personal singularity against the tide of standardization. This would be close to how members of The Crew and its derivatives would understand the form of knowledge they practiced. As expressed in the name and the practices of one later project, such ‘wild learning’ implies participating in the ongoing tinkering and expansion of collectives and projects under concrete circumstances that keep changing.

But this articulation could not account for its own relevance. The emphasis on concreteness tends to conceal the fact that this emphasis is itself an abstraction – and so, install a paradoxical dualism. What would be the point in writing, multiplying, distributing, and reading texts that cherish a radical singularity of communities of practice while offering purely ‘analytical’ concepts (see to this, Nissen [2016])? Further, this would deprive us of ways to address the performative aspects of The Crew itself, without which it could not have realized its struggle for recognition; for, even if The Crew did not ‘perform’ on predefined and ‘scholastically’ rationalized standards, they managed to construct alternative but powerful venues and infrastructures of artefacts with which to model their image, their singular brand, and the identity of their participants. Far from a mute practice, The Crew was a laboratory for the interchanges of doing, displaying and modelling as aspects of performance. And the analyses that I and my colleagues made were deeply enmeshed and intermingled with these. In other words, any account of The Crew as prototypical would be incomplete without a reflection of the ways that such an account entered into inter-textual relations with the many other model artifacts that carried and mediated The Crew’s identity.

In the final case, we shall look further into that kind of relations. But let us first consider briefly how the limit case of The Crew speaks to the question of organizational identity. While the NA seemed to reduce identity to a set of standardized procedures, easily and universally replicable, thus tabooing the organizational singularity that was crucially implied in its way of working, The Crew revered that singularity even as it operated through a political transcendence that was made possible by public representations. These two radical cases help us identify limitations to ‘symbolism’ (e.g. Hatch and Schultz [2002]) and ‘new institutionalism’ (e.g. Powell and DiMaggio [1991]) as approaches to organizational identity. Against a functionalism that simply stipulates organizational rationality as defined by survival or goal-achievement in a given form – and proceeds to discover its conditions and operations – these theories point to the relative multiplicity and capriciousness of such forms, and this seems to imply that they are formed and held together by discourse and symbols rather than by functional necessity. In Hatch and Schultz (2002), it is mediated by such symbols that the organization defines itself in its interchanges with stakeholders, balancing between narcissism and over-adaptation; and in Alvesson and Kärreman (2007), it is those symbols that define and control the aspirations of employees as they take them literally (more than the theorists do) in order to be able to deviate from them in practice. Indeed, this does resonate with my claim that symbols that interpellate in processes of recognition can be powerful. But we need the context of the struggle for recognition and the broader ideological horizon of hope, if we want to take it anywhere useful. Without it, the power of symbols seems capricious, and its theoretical reflection becomes futile or nihilist. The irony of profane belief in arbitrary discourse means that anything beyond functionalism is reduced in a Nietzschean way, basically, to pure expressions of will. Once we have escaped the functionalist idea of necessity, we can approach standards as optional, as conventions with a

certain internal rationality but whose match with any concrete situation and subjectivity remains to be determined. This opens to the oscillations between belief and cynicism, dogmatism and tinkering, that come with standardization: When we ‘externalize’ standards as discourse carried by symbols and model artifacts, we are left with nothing but a pure subjectivity – until we turn back and submit to those standards again.

With all the half-hearted ‘profane belief’ characteristic of NA members, at least their reference to a Higher Power points, however mystified and vainly, beyond that vicious circle, expressing the hope of breaking it. As for The Crew, all their symbols referred to The Crew itself as singular entity; this was taken seriously, not because it was seen to exemplify this or that specific virtue that matched the preferences of certain groups of individuals, but because it realized the higher power, as it were, that came with political recognition; because the organization's public self-display with those symbols was a key part of that process. In its struggle for recognition, The Crew’s identity was *at once concrete and general* because of its singular way of universalizing the predicament of socially excluded young people; and it was the symbolic practices and artifacts that carried and performed that unity. This is the final lesson to be taken with us to the next case.

STUFF

We – who have read this text so far – have seen one collective in which the ‘we’ was always plural, and another in which it remained singular. All the while, we have implied the opposite logical forms as shadows. Even as anonymous, the organization NA was there all along, as was each of its local instantiations. The Crew kept defining itself as singular, but it did so through multiplying events, representations, practices, and through interpellating a multitude of participants and supporters. We have noted strong forces and valid reasons behind keeping those other aspects of organizational identity in the shadows. And I have suggested that we may hope to overcome them, in a kind of proto-type identity that performs a self-reflection of the organization’s singularity as *proto*, as well as its plurality as *type*. Finally, the only way I could propose for this to happen was to become aware of how these processes were part of struggles for recognition. The question “who, ‘we’?” must be rearticulated as a practice of reconstituting ‘us’ within such struggles, continuously recreating the ways we perform and represent ourselves. This is what we’ll do in this last case.

You can find us at <https://stuffsite.org/>. That is, of course, if that website lasts as long as this text; or if you go through the trouble of reconstructing it at a later date – assuming the persistence of the internet itself as the ultimate archive. But why worry about archiving? Haven’t we left behind the fantasy that social theory is written for a definite posterity – since it now shares the fate of all other texts and works of art: That of immediately adding to the Great Flow of cyberspace (Groys 2016), the current explosion of amounts of work that are going to be preserved but read by an accidental few, if any at all? Everything is archived, so that we may still entertain the comforting image of a God’s Eye, in which ‘our’ perspectives – those of writers and readers – can merge; but we know, too, how unlikely it is that anyone will ever look into any particular corner of that monstrous archive. The transcendence achieved by collective objectification will not save us from mortality. Even we shall die – not only as human individuals, but as – any – collective. Mortality comes with singular situated existence, even if the mortality of a collective is different from that of a person.

Yet, there would be no point in writing or reading this if it were not for the hope of a relevance that stretches, if not to eternity, then at least across time and space so as to form part of

some human endeavor that unites us. We do not need a religious or deterministic teleology for this to drive our work. All we must hope for is to be recognized as potentially contributing to some worthy project, which, in that recognition, joins us – writers and readers – with this text and with what we imagine it to refer to. Such projects are transcendent even if they are also mortal, continuously emerging and reconstituted in acts such as writing and reading.

This idea of a situated but transcendent community of authors and readers is our point of entry because it helps us keep in mind what constitutes us as STUFF. Of course, we could refer to ‘meetings’ of some of those people depicted in the ‘About’ section – real human bodies, in time and space, talking and drinking coffee – or, indeed, we could note how we constructed ourselves accountably in applications to funding bodies, as collaborations between us as individual members of loosely coupled organizations. But the point of these meetings and collaborations is realized as we reach out to audiences such as *you*, through artifacts such as *this text*; your reading is one of the forms of the recognition we hope for. It is, however, only one form out of several; this particular form of recognition is what mostly defines STUFF as one of *my* projects, as a kind of empirical-practical *research*, as one of the things I do as professor, and as employee of Aarhus University. The hope of this one form of recognition is one constitutive concern of STUFF; but STUFF carries other concerns, projects, identities, too. These are in fact weightier when we present ourselves. In ‘About’ it is written (May, 2016):

The purpose of STUFF is to establish a virtual platform in the shape of a website where youth life and identity can be displayed, with the challenges, ways of becoming, and communities, that stand out in a postmodern era. The display at the website takes place in two basic forms: Aesthetic productions like film, lyrics or photo galleries, and catalogue texts that debate with reference to specific productions. The choice of a virtual platform is an attempt to join the trend of expanding digital media and their implications for life in general and youth life in particular. In addition, STUFF, as a location, is meant to reach across geographical distance and national borders. The specific starting point is a community around socially precarious young people with a problematic use of drugs, and the lives this implies. (...) We want to establish a place (a commons) that renders research, youth work and drug counselling in a new context, where aesthetics and multimedia are foregrounded as ways to document, produce, and restore the good youth life. And where this can gain relevance as professional effort, as research practice, and as social youth capital, in mutual exchange and movement.

It all began as in 2013 we presented our collaboration at a conference for researchers and counsellors on “The Subject of Addiction” (Nissen, forthcoming), partly in the form of a *gallery*. We realized that articles such as the present could be regarded as *catalogue texts*. With this simple turn of perspective, we had embarked on a project of creating an 'infrastructure of information' (Bowker and Star 1999) that joined us in a way that differed from those infrastructures known as ‘research projects’ - with their data collections, interviews, ethics procedures etc. - and ‘courses’ - with their syllabus, teachers and students, exams etc. This is trans-disciplinary, not only by addressing issues in practices that do not match any given discipline, and by the reflexive distance to disciplinary knowledge that this opens up (Stenner and Taylor 2008), but also in terms of transforming the inter-subjective relations, the power-knowledge formats, leaderships and selfhoods implied in 'discipline'.

Further, this all hinges on the *professionals'* transformation of the standards of counselling. What they do together with their young clients is still accountable as counselling, yet in a form that reconstitutes counselling fundamentally, not least by connecting with these infrastructures of information – rather than only with those of clinical records, tests, and evidence of therapeutic effect. If we study the accounts given by the professionals at their institutions' websites, in

articles in professional journals, and in various kinds of meetings, teaching, supervision etc., we can clearly see the precarious nature of this accountability. On the one hand, what they do is barely recognized as psychotherapy in the clinical literature; on the other hand, the 'U-turn-model', named after one of the institutions, has achieved some national fame and official recognition. In the complex politics of this recognition, STUFF constitutes *one* form of 'documentation', even if it differs radically from the language of 'effect' that dominates social policy governance. It could not stand alone, of course: The organizations make sure to also provide numbers. But it stands, and it contributes.

As was the case with The Crew, we believe that this not only feeds into the objectivity of the artifacts, but also endows the collectives of professionals and clients with powers to interpellate. In fact, this is a rearticulation of the method of 'narrative practice', where edifying narratives are not only scaffolded, but also materialized and sanctioned with diplomas and other quasi-official artifacts to boost their impact (White 2007) – a rearticulation that stresses participation and emergent collectivity, to the point of no longer resting easily within the standard frame of therapy, counselling, or even service delivery.

If we then direct our attention to the young clients who are thus interpellated, STUFF is a venue for recognition, not just of their efforts to overcome their own drug habits or marginalization, but of their *art* as valid contributions to an emerging culture and to addressing a social problem. Again, this should not be thought of in terms of the traditional hierarchies of the art world. These would clearly define STUFF as a collection of amateur products and thus the work as therapeutic or educational imitation. The participation of a professional film director and a counsellor with additional credentials as artist and curator only puts this judgment half-way into doubt. Rather, what shakes it is the development in contemporary art and in the general culture. According to Boris Groys,

Contemporary means of communication and social networks like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter make it possible for the global population to display their photos, videos and texts in such a way that they cannot be distinguished from any other post-Conceptualist artwork. And contemporary design makes it possible for the same population to shape and experience their own bodies, apartments or workplaces as artistic objects and installations. This means that contemporary art has become definitively a mass cultural practice, and, further, that today's artist lives and operates primarily among art producers rather than among art consumers. (Groys 2016, 110-1)

Modern art always included attempts to efface the institutional boundary between art and life. The self-presentation of the artist is perhaps the most widely performed version of this. One form this has taken throughout Modernity has been 'auto-fiction', the deliberate paradoxical coincidence of autobiography with fiction⁶. Obviously, this resonates with the rise of 12 step fellowships and the derivative cultural standard narratives performed on mass TV such as the Oprah Winfrey show (Illouz 2003). As medicalization marches on, self-exposure, even as addict, becomes a way of achieving recognition. Recognition is not simply given with the 'God's Eye' of the internet, just by posting a snapshot of one-self; but the key mechanism of being objectified and dealt with as 'one of us' of an emergent community is deployed, in ways that are hard to predict. This does not cancel, but it does contradict and mediate in new ways, the processes of social stigma. If Groys' rendering, preoccupied with the art scene and the masses, tends to occlude the problem of public stigma as the shadow side of recognition, Eva Illouz points to the sociological forces that forge "glamour of misery" communities around the techno-social

⁶ Incidentally, the problem of addiction is one of the themes that have been treated in such a way the earliest and most consistently, from Coleridge through Ditlevsen to Burroughs and Bukowski (Plant 1999).

networks of the TV shows, as they interact and meddle with other genres and other networks such as politics, women's magazines, etc. Thus, the stigma/recognition-tension is basically *undecided*, as the young drug users collaborate with counsellor-artists, bringing in their various subcultural references and forms of expression.

This implies the 'meeting in movement and on neutral ground' that we saw above in the case of The Crew. The creativity inherent to art, the openness of its artefacts and events to multiple semantics, achieves a potential for recognized objectivity as the 'relational aesthetics' (Bourriaud 2002) of intervening in the social problems and the self-performances of the young drug users and their friends, relatives, and networks of professional; or, again with Groys (2008), as the production and transformation of *the social as such* characteristic of art, redefining its foundational criteria through 'aesthetization', rendering them as objects of contemplation and problematization *sub speciae aeternitatis*. In conjunction with the struggles for recognition as innovative therapy and as research, this implies a social kind of openness that is very different from the individualizing mirror provided by the 'neutrality' of traditional psychotherapy.

All in all, the way that STUFF fuses singularity with universality constitutes it as beyond mere hybridity or flexibility. The collective does not simply dissolve into or move between a set of standards, not even a set that could be abstractly imagined to be infinite. And it could not be reduced to a conglomerate of concerns for stakeholders' given interests. Rather, it fuses concrete concerns, perspectives and tendencies in the form of a *commons* that is also a *liminal* space of becoming. The concept of liminality, when freed from its original functionalist understanding, points to spatio-temporal situations that are hybrid in ways that are not reducible to mixtures of the rationalities and standards of the institutions between which people move or boundaries are drawn (Greco and Stenner 2015; Stenner and Moreno-Gabriel 2013). Victor Turner (1995) identified the ways that, already in the rites of passage that Van Gennep (2011) described, the liminal phase of a ritual would invoke and express universal qualities and paradoxes of a culture; and he generalized liminality from its status as 'exceptional universalism' to a wider phenomenon in a Modernity fundamentally characterized by change. In many ways, this resonates with Foucault's concept of heterotopia (1986), which derives its hybridity from the – always precarious, incomplete, paradoxical – realization of universal qualities in spatio-temporal sites. But it reasserts this spatial "identity of identity and difference" (Taylor 1975) in the temporality of a historical process that is not arbitrary, even if the future (as Derrida's *l'avenir*) is not subsumable to a pre-given teleological necessity. Thus, overcoming functionalism implies placing hybridity in the context of radical sociocultural projects of change. Liminal situations are situations that hold and perform potentials, invoking universal qualities and *thus* constituting hybridity. In this approach, then, the utopian – and interpellating – quality of hybridity is no longer an unreflected quality of the theory itself, as the emancipatory appeal of a critical theory that cherishes liberal heterogeneity. Rather, it highlights the transcendent normativity of liminal spaces – and facilitates a reflection of the theory's own performativity⁷.

⁷ Again here, the analysis helps us identify limitations of certain organization theories: The systemic approach that points beyond reproduction to potentiality, as a description of forms of leadership in hyper-complex times, tends to empty such potentials of any normative content. All that can be established as development is the tendency toward more complexity, and the concomitant tendency of managers to nourish hyper-reflexivity, playfulness, and openness - in short, potentials (Pors and Andersen 2015). Such formalism offers analytical tools with which to approach the logical structure of organized practices, but it blurs their historicity, as well as that of the theory itself as performative; thus, it can be said to match or even affirm the highest value of capitalism, the process utopia (Harvey 2000) of growth itself, as abstract surplus, open and blind to its diverse consequences for some and for all.

More specifically, as a liminal space, STUFF does more than mix or open up standards. As it is rendered here, in this text, it carries and expresses the ‘blues hope’ (Mattingly, 2010) of a welfare state that addresses the social problems currently labeled ‘addiction’ in ways that include but transform the individualized self-care of our medicalized culture, into a reflective performance of collective care – as a policy vision or utopia that provides an alternative to the currently dominant neoliberal and communitarian trends.

More generally, sites such as STUFF invite a recognition of the ways that the spaces of the exhibition and the stage may, at this historical moment, converge with ‘worksites of citizenship’ and with scientific experiments, as transformed and expanded classrooms and counselling spaces (cf. Bank and Nissen, forthcoming). The point is not to claim, of course, that ‘the organization’ or ‘the collective’ should be, finally, reduced to a notion of space. But if we want to understand the singularity of any collective as performing universalizing aspirations, we must address how it is indexed. The concept of a ‘site’ captures the uncertain location of the collective as embodied, instantiated and emplaced in either time-space or metaphorical spaces constructed with (cyber) artefacts, or both. As we have seen, this double indexicality implies a complex mortality. ‘We’ exist for as long as each of us (given our various concerns, in our material and limited lives) prioritize ‘us’ by meeting up, writing texts like this, etc. ‘We’ linger on, incessantly reconstituted (or so we hope), in the great flow of the internet and the other infrastructures of information that increasingly connect to it, and through it, such as the academic library system. And these mediations through individual priorities and trans-temporal network artefacts transform, but do not cancel, the recognition of the collective also by other collectives, such as in this case Aarhus University, Elsinore Municipality, City of Copenhagen, etc.

Conclusion

The cases chosen here could of course be read as examples of a set of issues that are relevant to a specific field of social work organizations, where the interdependence and overlap of leadership with pedagogics / therapeutics with welfare state politics are, if not always obvious, then at least arguable. And the problem of mediation through the internet that is highlighted mostly in the third case is perhaps at issue only at this point in time. But the thing about prototypes is that their singularity does not rule out their potential generality.

Could it be that they tell a story, too, about what readers will recognize as ‘organization’ in other times and places? The analyses I have offered suggest this to be the case by claiming general concepts as relevantly questioning or characterizing singular events, practices and collectives. My readers will of course question these claims, both in terms of the meaning of those concepts and in terms of their power to address those events. And their recontextualization to other events is entirely in your hands.

But the time has come to reflect organization as singular collectivity. The *who, we?*-question is pertinent since collectives (including those we call organizations) are contingent, precarious and mortal, while nonetheless vital and co-constitutive of whom we are as individual subjects. Our emancipation from the premodern and modern metaphysics that used to anchor collectives does not make them any less essential. On a larger scale, this has been acknowledged for long in terms of statehood and citizenship, even if the ever more turbulent oscillations between neoliberal and neoconservative politics attest to the unresolved state of the problem. But with increasing socio-cultural reflexivity and flexibility, it achieves relevance at all levels and scales.

Managers tend then to reshuffle their organizations, or subdivisions of them, simply *because they can*: It is their job to redesign the organization to optimize it, even if – and paradoxically more so because – criteria remain disputable and multiple alternative identities could be construed. We can, and most definitely should, object to this tendency, arguing for a sluggishness that might allow for a bottom-up relational agency (Edwards 2011) or coordination (Bechky 2006) to emerge. In that sense, we should be wary of the question; but we should not be afraid of it. This article has suggested some humble steps toward a language in which we might hope to engage with the ‘who we’-question in some cases when it cannot be postponed and cannot be taken lightly.

I have claimed that the nature of the question takes us beyond not only any functionalist organization theory, but also beyond the post-functionalisms of systems or discourse theories. It is not sufficient to be able to note the semantics by which a given collective persists. Nor is it enough to add a pragmatics of signs or, with the implied choice between their self-sufficiency and their complete reduction to situated practices. We must address collective subjectivity.

Finally, I propose that, when we do that, we engage in critique, that is, in processes of contingent recognition that co-constitute subjectivities (individual and collective) by constructing artifacts by which they are mediated. In that sense, our theories are performative: They suggest concepts with which to build models of singular events and subjects for a general relevance – that is, prototypes – and such models (this text is itself one) are taken to constitute collectives in liminal transcendence, as reaching beyond themselves, potentially reflexive of their mortality.

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